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ABSTRACT

Information on the Hmong (Mong) people living in Wisconsin, their educational background, the reasons they came to the United States, and the problems they are facing is provided. The Hmong are a closely knit ethnic group from Laos who migrated there from China in the 18th century. The Hmong began arriving in the United States in the late 1970s as a result of the Vietnam War. Since 1975, an estimated 80,000 Hmong have been admitted to the United States, and since then, the Hmong population has increased to about 130,000 nationwide. The education of Hmong children had been totally disrupted in Vietnam, and many of those who came to the United States had experienced little formal education. In the 1995-96 school year, there were nearly 16,000 limited-English-proficient students in the Wisconsin schools, of whom 9,310 were Hmong. Sixty-three percent of the Hmong families in the United States were still living below the poverty line, and most of them had little education. The participation of Hmong parents in their children's education has been limited by their own low educational attainment and by cultural characteristics that cause them to leave education to professional educators. The Hmong students who have made it to college have found themselves disadvantaged because of their language problems, family responsibilities, and lack of skills. The most pressing problem for Hmong students is the potential for gang involvement. Suggestions for improving the educational experience of Hmong students in Wisconsin include asking for Title VII funding to provide additional educational services and trying to hire more Hmong bicultural and bilingual staff in the schools. Professional development for Hmong bilingual teachers and cultural awareness programs to promote educational equity are also needed. Education is the key to the successful adjustment of Hmong students to the United States. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Crisis in Mong Education:

Urgent Needs for Professional Development

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Introduction

It was estimated that over 80,000 Mong have arrived in the United States as a consequence of the Vietnam Conflict since 1975. Since then, the Mong-American population has been exponentially doubled to 165,000 by 1990 and is expected to reach 330,000 by the year 2000. As a result, this has brought a lot of concerns to many educators both at the local school districts and at the state department of education, particularly in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. This article will provide information on the Mong and their educational background, the rationale why they came to the United States and address the crisis in Mong. The author will conclude with some recommendations for the local, state, federal agencies, and make an appeal to school districts and institutions of higher learning to respond to the urgent needs of the Mong professional development particularly in the state of California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota in order to meet the educational needs of the Mong-American population.

Who are the Mong?

The Mong are a closely knit ethnic people from Laos speaking a language similar to Chinese Mandarin. The Chinese have four or five tones and the Mong have eight tones. They originally migrated from China in the eighteenth century and settled in Southeast Asia. Those in Laos assisted France during its colonial rule and the United States in its secret war against the Communists during the Vietnam conflict.

Because of the constant massive migration from place to place, and from country to country, the Mong have experienced a series of formative episodes: with the Chinese, with French colonialism, with the Vietnam conflict, and with the refugee camps in Thailand during their transition to resettlement in the United States and other western countries.

In China, little is known about Mong education during the period before eighteenth century. It is my assumption that the first Mong inhabitants in China made their living through small-scale farming, domestic animal keeping, hunting, and trapping. As time passed, guilds such as blacksmith, silversmith, craftsmaking, clothes-

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making, shamanism, customs, and rituals were developed. These skills were then passed on informally from father to son, from mother to daughter, and from generation to generation within the familial context through oral tradition. Then,as part of our struggle for survival, the Mong continued their migration south of China reaching the northern parts of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand around 1810-1820 (Mottin, 1978).

In Laos, during the precolonial period before the French protectorate, the Lao traditional school system was mainly the pagoda schools or the monastic school system influenced by Hindu Buddhist principles from India. There is no historical evidence suggesting that any Mong were educated in this system.

During French Colonialism (1892-1947), the French introduced the European model, including its educational system which was implemented in Laos for nearly fifty years. The system was highly centralized and very selective. Curricula were based on the French educational pattern, and instruction was conducted in the French language. Since education was focused mainly for the elites, which were three to six percent of the population, only a few Mong benefited from this system.

During the post-colonial period, the aftermath of World War II brought tremendous change in the Mong society. The Cold War was the turning point when Mong society changed from simple to complex. During the Vietnam conflict, the Mong were recruited by the CIA as U.S. Secret Army in Laos to fight against the Communists. Another factor was the emergence of Christianity that brought many Mong and Khamu tribes converting to Christianity. This brought the development of Mong orthography or Mong writing system by American missionaries to Laos for the first time in the 1950s. However, the Romanized Popular Alphabet system was not allowed to be used in Laos and was not utilized until the Mong started arriving in the United States in 1976.

Education of the Mong children was totally disrupted because of the constant fighting and movement of the Mong. The first school was built for Mong in 1961 with twenty-seven pupils. By 1969, this school was expanded to a system of nine junior high schools, two high schools, and a teacher training school. About 300 Mong students enrolled in French high schools, and another seventy in the local Lao-American school, and two dozen in universities across the world (Schanche, 1970). According to Dao Yang, in 1971, 340 Mong students attended public and private secondary schools in Vientiane, Laos, and thirty-seven studied abroad (Yang, 1975). Seying, a former administrative officer with the Office of Inspector of Primary Education in Laos, asserted that, in 1975,

primary education in Xieng Khouang, the home of the Mong, was expanded to include nine school districts with 164 schools, 20,000 students (18% were ethnic Lao and Khamu), thirty beginning teachers, twenty intermediate teachers, and 200 temporary seasonal teachers (Seying, 1992).

Why did the Mong come to the United States?

When the United States became involved in the Vietnam conflict, there was much resistance against the Communists from South Vietnam. The U.S. troops were deployed along the seventeenth parallel. It was difficult for the Communists to transport troops, food, and ammunition to support their ground fighting squads in South Vietnam. In turn, the Communists cut a new route through Laos, Route 13 also known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, where the Mong lived. Because the Communists breached the Geneva Accords of 1962 (that guaranteed the neutrality of Laos) by sending their supplies through Laos to South Vietnam, the CIA approached the Mong General Vang Pao to form a special force known as the U.S. Secret Army in Laos to perform two missions.

General Vang Pao specified the two-fold missions as follows: The first mission was to strategic-ally penetrate the Communist force to reduce their troops, ammunition, and food along the Ho-Chi-Minh Trail. The second was to provide general and special rescue missions to downed American pilots (General Vang, 1981). When US planes were shot down while bombing North Vietnam, they could either attempt to go east to the Gulf of Tonkin so that the US submarines could pick them up, or they could fly west as far as possible and they would be rescued by the Mong commando units. Sometimes, the Mong sacrificed as many as ten, twenty, or more lives just to save one downed American pilot. Each of the Mong was paid two to three dollars for each dangerous mission. Our American allies were treated with respect, dignity, and hospitality in our Mong homes. Though we were poor in terms of money, we were rich in our accommodation, respect, and human dignity. Each of us on our own was self-sufficient because of our agricultural economy.

The U.S. intervention in Laos resulted in large-scale air operations over Northern Laos, especially in the province of Xieng Khouang, the home of the Mong. Branfman reported that over 25,000 missions were flown against the Plaines des Jarres from May 1964 through September 1969. Over 75,000 tons of bombs were dropped and over 50,000 airmen at distant bases were involved in the bombing (Branfman, 1972). Robbins asserted that the American airmen who fought this secret war were known as "the Ravens" and that their stories during the Vietnam conflict were locked away in classified archives and would not be revealed until after the year 2000 (Robbins, 1978).

Bruchett (1970) reported that the tonnage of bombs dropped on Lao villages exceeded that dropped in any year on North Vietnam, more than on Nazi-occupied Europe in World War II.

Even though thousands of the Mong people were killed and wounded and the Plaines des Jarres may have disappeared forever, the massive bombardment was kept secret from the world. If it had been publicized, the United States would have been known to breach the Geneva Accords of 1962 that guaranteed the neutrality of Laos. The province of Xieng Khouang, Laos, home of the Mong, may have been used as a testing ground for chemical warfare, first by the United States and later by the Soviet Union during their competition for the leading role in the arms race during the Cold War. After 1975, the Soviet Union used aerial attacks on the territory with gas rockets of different types -- yellow, green, or red-- that caused headaches, vomiting, diarrhea, dysentery, and death to people exposed to those gases. The Mong referred to this phenomenon as the "Yellow Rain." An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 17, 1992, noted that "Russian President Boris Yeltsin has explicitly confirmed that his Soviet predecessors were lying in denying that the 1979 anthrax epidemic in Sverdlovsk was the result of an accident at a germ warfare installation and asks when we will learn the truth about the yellow rain reported by Mong tribesmen in Laos" (1992, June 17). *The Wall Street Journal*, p. 16. Hamilton-Merritt (1981, August) asserted that about 20,000 Mong may have been exposed to poisonous gassing during the war. The United States Department of State documented over 13,000 people dead.

From 1960 to 1975, the numbers of Mong casualties were enormous. Branfman (1972) estimated that ten percent or more of the population of northeast Laos had either been killed or died due to war injuries. The Vietnam war was extremely detrimental to the Mong. Many innocent children as young as fourteen were drafted to the military to bear arms. No official census was conducted to see how many were killed in this fifteen-year war.

After the United States troops withdrew from Southeast Asia, the Mong in Laos were persecuted for political reasons by the Communist government. In 1976, Congress recognized that the Mong had been employed by the CIA and authorized the State Department to admit some as refugees to the United States.

Demographically, it is estimated that since 1975 80,000 Mong have been admitted into the United States for resettlement. Since then, the Mong population has increased to about 130,000 nation-wide in 1994 and to 150,000 in 1996. According to the statistics compiled by the Energy, Poverty and Refugee Services (EPRS), State of Wisconsin, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), of these numbers, 31,327 Mong currently live in

Wisconsin, the second largest Mong concentration in the United States after California. Lewis (1994) looked at *A Profile of the Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese People in the United States* for the National Association for the Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese based primarily upon data from the 1990 U.S. Census. This report revealed that the Mong are a very young population. Over 60% are 17 and under; 43% have more than 4 children. Almost 72% of Mong adults have less than a high school education, and over half reported no education at all. This lack of formal education in Laos contributed to a low labor force participation rate of about 30%. About 31% of Mong households reported income from $12,000 to $20,000 and 35% above $20,000. These wages are for two or three wage-earners per household. About 1.3% of Mong aged between 18 and 24 have a bachelor's degree or above and 3.2% of those age 25 and over.

This study shows that, of all the Southeast Asian refugees coming to the United States, the Mong were probably the least technologically sophisticated and the least formally educated. As a result, they face notoriously difficult adjustment problems in almost every aspect of life. As Mong, we are not only illiterate in our own language but also our lives had been totally disrupted by the long wars in Laos. Since we did not have the skills of reading and writing, consequently, we were left with very limited marketable skills to make a living in a highly technologically developed nation such as the United States.

Education for Mong at the Crossroads

Education for the Mong is now at the crossroads. As a people, the Mong have always been survivors and have gone through difficult times. Those who made it to the United States have experienced great turmoil and trauma on their journey, which is not over yet. We are the survivors.

Thao's study (1994) found that the Mong refugees who came to Chicago between 1978 and 1987 were faced with tremendous frustration in terms of social and educational problems during their adjustment in the United States. Problems included cultural shock, the language barrier, cultural clashes, acculturation, acclimation, Americanization, and a horrifying phenomenon -- Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome (SUDS). Sherman (1988) revealed that over 115 Mong males (between the ages of twenty and fifty-five) who were physically healthy died in their sleep.

Based on the statistics provided by Department of Public Instruction or DPI, during school year 1995-1996, there were 15,798 limited English Proficient (LEP) students in Wisconsin. The Mong accounted for 9,319,

which is 59% of the total LEP student population. The Mong are now considered the largest language minority groups in the state of Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Education, 1977). Though there is no statistical tabulation for the numbers of Mong bilingual teachers in Wisconsin, based upon my assessment and conversation with Mong community leaders in Wisconsin, there are about 10 Mong certified teachers. Therefore, the ratio between Mong certified teachers and Mong LEP students is about 1:931 in Wisconsin.

California Department of Education (1996) reported that as of March 1, 1996 the 34,000 Mong students enrolled in California public schools, 31,156 were identified as limited English proficient (LEP) students. The statistics also revealed that there are twenty-nine Mong certified bilingual teachers in California. Therefore, the ratio between Mong certified bilingual teachers to Mong LEP students is 1:1,000 in California. Whereas in Minnesota, based upon my conversation with an official of the Minnesota Department of Education, there are about 25,000 LEP students and the Mong account for 9,500, which is 38%. Currently, there are forty-nine bilingual Mong teachers in Minnesota; therefore, the ratio between Mong certified bilingual teaches versus Mong LEP students is 1:200 in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1997, April). Therefore, English language continues to be a barrier impeding them from developing their full potential and becoming contributing members in the society.

In terms of socioeconomics, 63% of the Mong families are still living below the poverty line so they are unable to provide their children with the basic needs. Due to their lack of formal education, Mong parents cannot help their children, and so Mong children are left to strive for themselves. Though Mong parents are extremely concerned about the education of their children, they are not vocal in bringing their concerns to schools. Perhaps the underlying rationale is that Mong parents entrust the education of their children into the hands of school districts, into the hands of educators. They believe that teachers are the experts, the people who "know best." Teachers are their children's "second parents (Thao, 1994).

Education for the Mong is now at the crossroads and the result could be either positive or negative. Fifteen years ago, the Mong children brought with them a tradition of respect for parents and teachers. Therefore, their behavior was prescribed, submissive, and more controlled. They were perceived positively and Mong students were obedient and good. Now, Mong children have begun to shift toward the negative side. As more Mong children are born in the United States, the Mong family structure is experiencing a tremendous cultural and language loss. As

Mong children begin to lose their cultural ties, they become distant from the Mong tradition. In addition, everyday, Mong children have to face the reality of the street gang problem, prejudice, and personal, and family problem... They are caught between two cultures, that of their parents and that of their peers.

Educationally, Mong parents and children experienced difficulties in adjustment. At the junior high and high school level, Mong students needed to adjust to the language barrier, the pressure of becoming academically proficient in the content areas, and peer pressure, besides being overwhelmed by their daily tasks. Some were limited to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and their English language proficiency was so limited that they could not be placed in the mainstream classrooms.

Mong children are struggling in the search for their identity. Many junior high and high school Mong students have been the target of gang recruits. Mong parents have expressed their deepest concerns about the education of their children. They want to find various mechanisms to keep up their children away from gang activities. In addition, they are concerned about the morality and the transmission of social values to their children. When their children begin to rebel against them, they start to question the quality of the education given to their children: Has the teacher really educated the whole child? Some are skeptical about whether teachers have held back some knowledge. In Laos, youth gangs did not exist. When there was an incident of theft or robbery, the individual, if caught, may have been severely punished or even killed. One strike and you are out. The encounter wish gang problems in America has emerged into a crisis in Mong education. Evenrud (1992) conducted a study on "An Educator's Response to Southeast Asian Gangs" in Minnesota and found that Southeast Asian gangs are very violent. You may remember an incident a few years ago a Mong family could not deal with this predicament when his son was involved in gang activity. The father committed suicide. Recently, another man committed suicide for the same reason.

At the college level, Mong students are very disadvantaged. Besides the language barrier and familial responsibility, Mong students lack strategies for studying and the skills of critical thinking and reasoning. They have difficulty passing the English language proficiency test and coping with the dormitory culture, they lack the research skills to write their papers. Many Mong students are lost in the big university system. Furthermore, some faculty members may not be sensitive to the Mong students' needs.

The whole generation of the Mong parents who are here in the United States today were trained to be

commandos in the special force to fight the Communists back in Laos. Their skills are not adequately and sufficiently transferable into the American job market. Things that are taken for granted by Americans have to be learned by the Mong. Those of us who made it to the United States are considered survivors. We really have great expectations for our children and want them to become good law abiding citizens and contributing members in America. Our children are our future, and we cannot afford to loose another generation.

Recommendations

The Mong have special concerns that need special attention. After all, the Mong account for the largest language minority in Wisconsin and ranked third behind Spanish and Vietnamese. Therefore, I would like to encourage each of you who are educators and leaders in education at the federal, state, and local level to work with the Mong communities in the state of Wisconsin and California to help us prevent school dropouts and gang-related activities. In addition, by addressing the needs of the Mong students, I urge you to take an active role in opening up the schools for multiple purposes such as the following:

1. Our most pressing problem relates to our children's involvement with gang activities. Local community agencies, school districts, and state, and federal institutions should take a proactive stance to work with Mong parents to find ways to divert Mong children's affiliation with gangs to activities that are positive and constructive. Intervention is urgently needed.
2. School districts with a heavy concentration of Mong families should request Title VII funding to provide educational services for the Mong children. Currently, there is only one Title VII-funded program in Wisconsin.
3. Your encouragement to employ more Mong bilingual and bicultural staff in your institutions will give both staff and Mong parents a sense of a community living among a diverse group and will support a climate of high academic expectations.
4. Your leadership and encouragement in the area of Mong staff development and training at all levels are needed. Staff could pursue their continuing education to receive credits or to work towards certification as bilingual teachers. Developing Mong staff is essential for the implementation of successful programs for educating the Mong students and eliminating the illiteracy problems within the Mong communities.
5. Your need to provide human and financial assistance for adequate teacher training of Mong bilingual/

bicultural educators to meet the needs of Mong students. The Mong are currently underrepresented in the staff under the Lau mandates. Yet, the educational needs of the Mong students have not been appropriately met with bilingual teachers who are trained to provide culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. The Mong bilingual teacher-student ratio is 1:2,197 in Wisconsin and 1:3,166 in California (California Department of Education, 1994). There were only four certified bilingual Mong teachers in Wisconsin and nine in California in 1994. Current statistics are not available. Due to the shortage of Mong certified bilingual teachers, the instructional needs of the Mong LEP students are met largely by ESL teachers and Mong bilingual teacher assistants. Some bilingual teacher assistants are recent graduates with bachelor's degrees from various disciplines. Therefore, educational equity has not been adequately addressed.

6. Encourage for school districts and postsecondary educational institutions to provide the bilingual education approach to learning. Mong students need to develop academic language as well as social communicative language. Research by Chamot (1993) shows most LEP students need five to seven years of instruction to reach even a moderate level of success in an academic curriculum taught in the second language.
7. Encourage bilingual and bicultural staff to assist the Mong students to make a smooth transition from elementary to secondary, and from secondary to higher education.
8. School districts should provide the Mong bilingual and bicultural staff with the opportunity to continue their professional growth and staff development.
9. Continue to encourage in local, state, and federal education agencies to train Mong parents to foster home-school cooperation in bringing their concerns to schools to improve the education of their children.
10. Your support in bringing schools to implement an inclusive curriculum that would be sensitive to the Mong culture would bring schools closer to achieving the National Education Goals as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of the Mong depends on many factors such as socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, family and household characteristics, parent education, language minority status, the length of time in the U.S., social classes, parental composition, home and family lifestyles, cultural background, leisure-time activities. However, education is really the key for our successful adjustment in the United States. It is expected that the younger generation of the Mong will have more opportunity for higher socioeconomic status. With a firm

commitment from the federal, the state, and local educational institutions and from you, the Mong, known for their intelligence, adaptability, and love for freedom, will continue to adjust as a community throughout the United States. With your support, the young Mong will successfully acculturate into American society, will advance to their full potential, and will contribute greatly to the advancement of life in the United States.

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